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ABSTRACT

Concerned with redefining instructional theory related to the teaching and learning processes in literature, this paper concentrates on articulating principles underlying literature instruction that can be taught in methods courses and that can become the framework that teachers internalize and use to make daily decisions about their teaching and their students' learning. The paper first points out that reader-based instructional goals are difficult to attain because the field of English education has not yet developed instructional approaches that lead to such endpoints. Drawing on the results of two related sets of studies, the paper argues that what "works" in the classroom usually takes place during discussion (both when the teacher is involved and when students work in groups), and that the most productive literary reasoning students do during those discussions involves the exploration of possibilities. The paper then records two eleventh-grade discussion lessons (one on "Tularecito" and one on "The Great Gatsby") as examples. According to the paper, The "Tularecito" lesson is controlled by the teacher, who bases her decisions about what to talk about on a close reading of the text; the "Gatsby" lesson, on the other hand, shows how discussion can be used to move student thinking along and to explore a horizon of possibilities. The paper suggests that it is this latter notion of discussion that needs to be at the center of the reform movement in literature. Thirty-four references are attached. (NKA)

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Discussion as Exploration: Literature and the Horizon of Possibilities

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The 1990s can be an exciting time for teachers of English, perhaps as exciting as the 1970s when dramatic changes began to take place in the teaching of writing. That reform was prompted by at least three agendas: First, business, industry, and the public-at-large were concerned about the writing abilities of high school graduates; Second, research in reading and writing was refuting the primarily skills-based approach to teaching, indicating that skills are best learned when students need them to complete real tasks. And third, teachers were becoming aware that writing involves both reasoning and reflection and that process-oriented instruction, designed to support students through that process, is more effective in helping them become better writers than the instructional focus on grammar and form that preceded it.

While the writing reform movement was a powerful one, leading to changes in the teaching of writing in the English classroom as well as across the curriculum, it focused more on students' abilities to write about the content of other coursework than on the content of the English coursework itself--literature. This created a schism within the English curriculum and paved the way for a new and needed pedagogical revolution, one that involves rethinking the teaching of literature. This revolution is prompted by: a) widespread concern about students' literary knowledge and reasoning abilities; b) by sociocognitive research indicating that students' instructional goals and learning activities need to change in ways that foster thoughtfulness; and c) by English teachers' frustration with the tension between a process approach to writing instruction and a text-based approach to literature instruction. It calls for rethinking instruction from the students' point of view, guided by approaches that validate students' own responses to what they read yet providing the support to help them question, consider, and reach more developed understandings.

Until recently, the teaching of literature has been guided primarily by New Critical theory (e.g., Brooks, 1947; Welleck & Warren, 1949), calling for a close reading of the text, with particular emphasis on the narrator, the point of view, and the "correct" interpretation. Such an approach is text-based, placing the teacher in the role of knowledge-holder and evaluator who leads the students to arrive at predetermined meanings and checks to see that these meanings are remembered and understood. It initiates students into the community of literary knowers who share the same approaches to, values about, and interpretations of the works they read. A body of reader response theorists (e.g., Bleich, 1978; Holland, 1975; Iser, 1978; Langer, 1990a, 1991; Rosenblatt, 1938, 1978) offer an alternative to the New Criticism (Tompkins, 1980). These theorists all see meaning as residing in the reader (although they differ in the degree of reader-text interaction), and regard readers as active constructors of meaning with personal knowledge, beliefs, and histories that affect their responses and interpretations, thus creating the potential for more than one "correct" interpretation. From such perspectives, instruction focuses on arriving at defensible meanings and refining them as well as considering the validity of other responses.

While reader-based theory has been espoused by English educators in recent years (DeLawter, 1990; Diaz, 1990; Diaz & Hayhoe, 1988; Hynds, 1992; Probst, 1990), the New Critical approach still

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dominates the classroom (Applebee, 1989, 1990), the instructional apparatus accompanying most literature anthologies (Applebee, 1991), and literature assessment (Brody, DeMilo, & Purves, 1989). I think this is in large part due to the easy fit between New Critical pedagogy and traditional models of education, where the role of the teacher as knower and the student as recipient has been well-defined and internalized in teachers' minds. In contrast, the role of the teacher and student in reader-based views of education has never been as clearly defined, and even the most well-intentioned teacher of response-based instruction needs to develop his or her own models of routines for how discussions are carried out as well as when and how to help students go beyond their initial impressions.

The Role of Discussion in Reader-Based Instruction

In recent years, my work at the Literature Center has focused on redefining instructional theory related to the teaching and learning processes in literature. My goal has been to articulate principles underlying literature instruction that can be taught in methods courses and that can become the framework that teachers internalize and use to make daily decisions about their own teaching and their students' learning. I imagine it as a reader-based framework that can supplant the traditional text-based one which treats the teacher or text (rather than the student) as the center of knowledge and the place to focus instruction. Reader-based instruction values both logical and creative thought. It also recognizes that meaning is initiated and controlled by the reader as a result of the reader having transacted with the text, and is subject to change as the individual thinks about and discusses that work in the future. In this view, after reading a work, students are left with an envisionment of the text, (see Langer, 1985, 1987, 1990a) the ideas and images they come away with after the first reading. But since these have not yet been reflected on, they serve merely as initial impressions. A focus on readers' initial impressions is the place to begin instruction. And the long range goal of literature education is to create a literacy of thoughtfulness (Brown, 1991), where students learn to go beyond these initial impressions as they develop deeper and more considered understandings (see, for example, Langer, 1991; Petrosky, 1992).

While at first glance, reader-based instructional goals seem easy to attain because they are at the heart of what most English teachers want their students to learn. In actuality they are very difficult to attain because the field of English education has not developed instructional approaches that lead to such endpoints. (Instead of beginning with the reader's initial impression and ending with the reader's own pondered and defensible interpretation and analysis, instruction generally begins with the text and ends with a predetermined sanctioned interpretation.) Pedagogy has treated the comprehension of literature as additive, with the belief that explication of phrases and sentences along the way will lead to an understanding of the whole, as opposed to the belief that discussion of the students' developing understandings (however incomplete or flawed) will lead to questions, rethinking and refining their understanding of the parts as well as the whole.

Discussion as Exploration

I have spent the past four years working on two related series of studies in an effort to provide English educators with principles that underlie reader-based discussion of literature and the ways in which instruction occurs during that discussion. The first set of studies (Langer, 1989, 1990a, 1990b) describes how readers "make sense" when engaging in a literary experience. This work indicates that when reading for literary purposes, readers explore possibilities. In doing so, readers juggle two sets of concerns--one dealing with the meaning of the work as a whole, the other dealing with their momentary understanding of what they have read. They treat both sets of concerns as fluid, with a potential for ever-changing meaning. Because they expect their more global as well as momentary

understandings to change, as they make their way through a piece, they never take their new ideas as they find them but probe beyond, rounding out their understandings by exploring feelings, intentions, and actions. They investigate what those possibilities might imply for their understandings at the moment in addition to where the piece might go. New understandings do not lead to endpoints, but instead reveal further areas for examination. In this way an ongoing exploration of horizons of possibilities lies at the heart of a literary reading.

In the second set of studies, I have thus far worked collaboratively with some 21 middle and high school English teachers from city and suburban schools. Although our work has moved through many phases (see, for example, Close, 1990; Langer, 1990a, 1990b), in general the teachers' goals have been to create response-based classrooms where their students are encouraged to develop and explore their own understandings and move beyond to form richer interpretations. My goal has been to study what works--and to identify the underlying principles of classrooms that help students to learn to study literature in increasingly more thoughtful ways. One of the earliest findings indicated that almost all productive instruction took place during discussion (both when the teacher was involved and when students worked in groups), and that the most productive literary reasoning students did during those discussions involved the exploration of possibilities. Elsewhere (Langer 1991, 1992, in progress) I have discussed the principles underlying such discussions and the ways in which teachers' support students growing ability to think more deeply about what they have read. In general, classes that "work" call for and expect the active and thoughtful participation of all students, and students are taught how to engage in literary discussions as well as ways to think in a literary manner. In the remainder of this report, I will draw on two typical lessons to help us better understand ways in which teachers and students communicate with each other in discussions where students explore possibilities much of the time, in contrast with situations in which this type of thinking seldom occurs.

The Great Gatsby

The following discussion takes place in Barbara Kray's 11th grade classroom in a suburban school district. The students ordinarily keep literature journals in this class, and are encouraged to jot down any questions they have as they read. Prior to this lesson, the students had read The Great Gatsby (by F. Scott Fitzgerald) through chapter 3. This lesson, as many others, is spent discussing questions the students have raised. The teacher begins this lesson by focusing on the students' concerns about what they have read so far, and the students work together in addressing the issues raised. Rather than a "right" answer, Barbara encourages her students to explore possibilities. The discussion takes about 20 minutes, during which time they talk about 5 topics: Why Nick was invited; rumors about Gatsby; Gatsby's relationship to his guests; the parties; Gatsby; (back to) rumors; (back to) the parties. We can see that as the discussion moves along the students begin to develop possible interpretations, building upon their initial impressions, what others have said, and their own rethinking.

Topic#1: Why Nick was invited.

Teacher: ...Christie, why don't you start us off?

Christie: One thing I wrote down was I wasn't exactly sure why he was invited to Gatsby's party. Why was he invited?

Teacher: Not why Gatsby, why Nick?

Christie: Right.

Teacher: Okay. Do you have any guesses? Any ideas at all?

Audra: Just because he was a neighbor, and all the others were invited. Maybe ... because he just lived so close, maybe Gatsby just needed someone he knows to be a true friend.

Paul: If he has a party and he has it for no reason....

Jen: They said that Miss Baker, she didn't know Gatsby, right? 'Cause it seemed weird that out of all that crowd, that Gatsby like took her aside and told her some secret. I didn't think she knew him at all, only knew who he was.

Audra: When he met her, and he met Miss Baker at Daisy's, I thought she said something about Gatsby, and he was curious because he didn't know anything about it but he never got a chance to ask her about.

Jen: So he did.

Teacher: She did. We don't know what the connection is, but she first mentioned Gatsby at Daisy's house. Has your question been answered Christie? Why (was Nick invited)? There are two possibilities. One is that everybody goes to the Gatsby mansion.

Christie: But he got invited by invitation.

Teacher: Aha. That's your question. Invitation. Okay, your suggestion is that he is a next door neighbor.

Paul: Yeah, and maybe that Gatsby just wanted another acquaintance, a different kind of acquaintance. Now all of a sudden he wants to tell him something.

Christie: It would seem like there was more, something more hiding.

Teacher: Your question is a good question. Ron?

Ron: Like a popular businessman.

Teacher: Who? Nick is a businessman of sorts. He's into stocks and bonds, or something like that.

Ron: Maybe he invited him there so he could heist something.

Teacher: It's a possibility. See, the thing is we don't know.

Ron: Maybe he wants a different opinion.

Teacher: Jen?

Jen: Like that scene when Nick was watching him by the water. Did Gatsby see him? It just seemed that there's a rumor going around the party that he supposedly killed some man, and maybe he's trying to wash that rumor away--like to get to know him before they make an opinion of him....

The students begin this discussion tentatively, using their initial (and more superficial) impressions as a way to explore the piece in greater depth. Although Christie's initial question does not get answered, it serves to help Christie as well as the other students think about possible reasons why Nick was invited. In fact, when the teacher asks Christie if her question has been answered, she seems to go beyond her original question, this time opening exploration of possible covert intentions surrounding Gatsby's party list. This line of thinking leads the students to a brief and superficial discussion of rumors about Gatsby in their early attempts to understand him better as a character.

Topic 2: Rumors about Gatsby.

Henry: Is he really German?

Teacher: We don't know.

Henry: Because we heard like at least people said he was German.

Patrick: There's a lot of rumors.

Teacher: There's a lot of rumors. What are some of the rumors?

Patrick: That he killed a man.

(Few students talking at once. Teacher hears someone say the word nephew.)

Teacher: Who was he supposed to be a nephew of?

Sala: Kaiser.

Teacher: Kaiser Wilhelm. Yes. And go ahead Jess.

Although the rumors about Gatsby only begin to be explored, the possibility of malevolence is introduced, and this topic is left for the students to ponder alone and to be picked up in discussion later.

Topic 3: Relationships - Gatsby and his guests.

Jess: I don't understand when he goes around to the party and he's asking people who Gatsby is, why everybody stares at him. Like, I don't understand that.

Teacher: Who are you asking about?

Jess: Nick, yeah.

Teacher: Can you direct us to something?

Jess: 42, second paragraph, when he finally meets Gatsby, he said, "Who's the host?" Gatsby

was just like amazed.

Teacher: (reading) "Well, as soon as I arrived, I made an attempt to find my host, but the two or three people of whom I asked his whereabouts stared at me in such an amazed way, and denied so vehemently any knowledge of his movements that I slempt off in the direction of the cocktail table, the only place in the garden where a single man could [unt]." Okay, now what's your question?

Jess: Why would he ask people? Why would they act that way? Why can't they tell him and say they don't know. They stare at him like, beastly.

Teacher: Why? That's a good question. Why would they stare at him?

Christie: Maybe the way he hosted this party. Different. Maybe he really didn't make any appearance at other parties. Didn't show up. I mean, he was there, but wasn't mingling with the guests....

Ron: Nobody knows who the real person is. The party is like a person gets adopted.

Henry: Ron, now you got me confused. (laughter)

Teacher: Christie, you made an observation?

For the sake of brevity, I have left out parts of the discussion about the party guests' relationship to Gatsby. However, in this part of the discussion, the students explore Gatsby's shadowy existence and lack of contact with his guests in contrast to their flamboyant behavior and unwillingness to confront their host or admit his distance. This leads to a brief discussion of Gatsby's other parties.

Topic #4: The parties.

Christie: I was gonna say maybe they were so amazed because he didn't, it was his first party that he had been to and he didn't know the style of the party that he threw (unt) 'cause it was more or less known to them and he didn't know it.

Teacher: Yeah, we get the sense that these other folks are regulars. What is it that amazes you? This is a word I've heard come out of your mouths. What is it that amazes you?...

Audra: It seems so elaborate that he goes, that these parties are regular parties, but they seem so elaborate and so huge, and so like things that you have to dress up for. People drunk and running all over the place, and people don't even know him.

Teacher: Jess?

Jess: In a way though, what Audrey said about everybody doing it. Because when he finally meets Gatsby and asks, Gatsby is like, "You don't know who I am." It was, you know, everybody should know who he was.

Paul: They knew who he was, but they never really met him....

Ron: Yeah, it seems like these people were in a fog.

Although the students discuss Gatsby's other parties, they seem to be doing so in order to understand him better, both as a character in his own right and in relation to the others. Thus, the discussion of other parties soon changes to a focus on Gatsby. At one point in this portion of the discussion, the teacher helps the students link what they are discussing with a rumor they discussed earlier, as a way to further explore the reasons for Gatsby's strange behavior.

Topic # 5: Gatsby.

Teacher: Yeah, Liz.

Liz: I got the impression like he'd be the type that didn't want to have himself seen a lot, just like stay inside. And they say like he threw all these parties.

Audra: I thought he was older.

Teacher: So did I. Let's hear some more.

Jen: I got the same impression. From someone who didn't seem very social, throwing these parties and that people came was so unusual. Didn't usually know them, but yet they're sitting around crying. Well, these people are crying.

Teacher: Why were they crying?...

Since the students do not have much information about Gatsby except for his elusive behavior, they look for possible clues related to the rumors they have read about.

Topic #6: (Back to) Rumors.

Jess: It's like he's doing everything to get on people's good side. Like when that girl rips her dress. It wasn't his fault, but he insisted on it.

Teacher: That's a good point. Now, why did he send her a new dress.

Voices: 'Cause it was his party. 'Cause it was his party and he felt responsible. He just didn't want any trouble.

Teacher: Did he say that?

Paul: She did, the girl did.

Teacher: She said she thought he didn't want any trouble. That sort of goes along with the fact that he's a nephew of the Kaiser. That he's done some bad things. He killed somebody.

Ron: He's trying to prove that the rumors that are going around about him were wrong.

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Teacher: Maybe.

Ron: Like he's killed somebody.

Audra: He cares what Nick thinks about the rumors.

Since the students still don't have enough information to determine whether or not the rumors are true, they move back to Gatsby's reasons for having the parties in the first place, as a means to further explore him as a character.

Topic #7: (Back to) The parties.

Shelby: Why do these people go to his parties if he's supposed to be such a (unt)?...

Teacher: Your guess is as good as mine. That's right, he is a party giver....What's your thinking on the party? Shelby, tell us, what are your thoughts about the party? You've seen two parties, actually you've seen three. What's your thinking about those parties?

Shelby: They're really weird. Like, he invites people he doesn't even know.

Teacher: Okay.

Paul: He's just trying to be nice.

Teacher: Maybe. Ian, add something to that. What's your thinking about the parties?

Ian: I don't think he's throwing them for himself.

Teacher: Interesting observation. For what purposes, do you think?

Ian: He's trying to make up for something. Feels obligated to.

Teacher: Well, maybe, Ian is suggesting he's throwing those parties 'cause he's trying to make up for something. He's done something and he's trying to atone for it or something....

In this portion of the discussion, the teacher attempts to bring the remaining students into the discussion, continuing their exploration of Gatsby's motives. She closes the lesson by inviting all students to think about what they might expect to happen in the next chapter, and reminding them to jot down any thoughts or questions that they might have.

Features of the Discussion

Altogether this is a fairly typical early discussion where students are encouraged to use their initial impressions as a way to explore possible meanings, the students haven't read enough or gotten deeply enough into the plot and characters to narrow in on preferred interpretations, argue for their

own views, assume multiple perspectives, or engage in critical analyses. This occurs later, as the students' envisionments of possibilities build--with further reading, thinking, and discussion. However, even during this early-in-the-book discussion, we have seen ways in which students have been given the opportunity to go beyond their initial impressions in exploring Gatsby's character, and the story's plot, and to gain sensitivity for other points of view. Some of the topics of discussion were explored in greater depth than others, with the implicit understanding that these could be picked up later (during the same or subsequent discussions) as new thoughts connect with old issues, thereby moving the students' understandings along.

It is interesting to look a bit more closely at the kinds of thinking the students have exhibited during this discussion. Approximately 80% of the time the students explored possibilities (e.g., "I don't understand when he goes around the party and he's asking who Gatsby is, why everybody stares at him" or "Maybe the way he hosted this party, differently"). This is the primary orientation readers take to literary experiences, particularly when they are entering into the world of the stories they read and living through the characters' experiences. In such cases, they treat their understandings as tentative, always subject to change. However, readers also enter into a less exploratory orientation some of the time, maintaining a more constant point of reference. This occurs when, for the moment, they wish to gain or share some very specific information, although it also occurs when they have purposely limited their reading to one particular kind of critical interpretation instead of following their own natural interpretive course. During this discussion, the students assumed this more pointedly information-seeking orientation toward meaning 20% of the time.

If we consider the ways in which the students related to the text, we learn that 54% of the time they were attempting to gain enough information to form an understanding of the characters and events (e.g., "I wasn't exactly sure why he was invited to Gatsby's party"), 43% of the time they were extending their understandings by building and elaborating on what they already knew (e.g., "Maybe he wants a different opinion," or "They knew who he was, knew of him. But when they came face to face with him did not know"). Overall, the discussion of Gatsby was primarily a time for the students to step into and build a world of meaning and they did this where their readings left off, through a particular type of discussion--discussion as exploration. Let us compare this with another type of class discussion, one that more typically occurs in classrooms, one where recitation rather than exploration is the goal.

Tularecito

The following discussion took place in Margaret Steven's 11th grade classroom in a city school. Prior to this discussion, the students had been given a photocopy of the short story "Tularecito" (by John Steinbeck) to read. This lesson, as many others in this class, focuses on text meanings and retracing the plot line of the story. The discussion takes almost 30 minutes, during which time they talk about 13 topics: pastures of heaven; do people still believe the story of Tularecito; Franklin Gomez; Pancho; doing penance; the baby; Pancho drunk; tangle of incoherence; (back to) story of Tularecito; what Gomez does; (back to) the baby; and Gomez' attitude toward the baby. Margaret focuses on the text and her students' comprehension, at a surface level. Instead of tapping the students' understandings and helping them question other possibilities, she has a right answer in mind for almost every question she asks, and we can see the students trying to "fill in" the information she seeks. When a student's response is what she is looking for, she uses it; when it is different, she asks for other responses. Rather than helping her students learn to question and shape their own interpretations, she uses the students' responses as a way to shape their understandings to match her own.

Topic #1: Pastures of heaven.

Teacher: What does the sentence itself mean? His origin? His past experience?

Terrence: His origin?

Teacher: What is something that is cast obscure?

John: Not clear.

Teacher: Not clear, you see? What is the sentence saying?

John: They're not clear where he came from. They're not clear where

Teacher: They're not clear where he came from. His origin. Okay, good. What or where is the pastures of heaven? What do you think it is?

Tarek: A place in another world.

Teacher: You think it's another world. Any guesses about that? Pastures of heaven--what does it sound like to you? What does it remind you of? Does it bring any ideas to mind?

Tarek: Pasture or fields.

Teacher: Pasture or fields. Okay, that's one thought. Any others?

Ron: Church.

Teacher: Church, okay. What else? All right, we'll come back to that and find out whether what you thought was correct or not, "the folks of the pastures of heaven."

In this segment the teacher has selected a particular sentence, one she feels is important for her students to understand. Although her first question asks for the students' understanding of the entire sentence, she segments the text even further by asking them the meanings of particular phrases "cast obscure" and "pastures of heaven." Thus, although the students have just completed reading the entire piece, they are drawn to focus not on the questions or understandings they have developed as a result of having read the story, but on particular ideas the teacher feels are related to the interpretation of the piece she wishes to lead them toward. Although the teacher's initial question about the meaning of the sentence is never completely answered nor its meaning fully discussed, she moves on to another question.

Topic #2: Do people believe the story of Tularecito?

Teacher: What about the story about Tularecito? Do the people accept it? How do you know?

August: (Reads) "...while his discovery is a myth which the folks of the pastures of heaven refuse to believe, just as they refuse to believe in ghosts."

Teacher: All right, they're not likely to believe his story anymore than they are likely to believe in stories about ghosts. So they don't know where he came from. They don't believe

the story that was given.

In this segment, the teacher asks a question, and then provides the answer, along with her own interpretation. She then goes on to be certain the students know who the characters are.

Topic #3: Franklin Gomez

Teacher: Who's Franklin Gomez? Ron, do you know who he is, Franklin Gomez?

Ron: His employer.
Teacher: An employer. Okay. That's good.

Ron: Also, a worker.

Teacher: He's an employer. I think that's a little closer. If you read the next line, that person in the second paragraph, you will figure out why we call him an employer.
Matt: 'Cause he hired Pancho.

Teacher: Yeah.

Matt: He has to interview the ranch hand; he's the boss....

Topic #4: Pancho

Teacher: Who's Pancho?

Mario: The employee.

Teacher: An employee, okay. Do you know anything else about Pancho?

Mariloo: He's a Mexican Indian.

Teacher: He's a Mexican Indian.

Tarek: He's always sober.

Teacher: What else? Is he always sober?

Rock: When he's not in jail.

Teacher: When he's not in jail, okay.

Matt: He doesn't drive when drunk.

Teacher: All right. That's good.

John: When he arrives at work he's always sleepy.

Teacher: Yeah, and that's important. Do you think he fools around? What gives you that impression?....

In this segment, once the students make it clear that they knew who Pancho is, she turns the questions toward what he was like. Although the students provide some of their own responses, the teacher does not ask them to elaborate on them nor on what they mean in terms of his character. Instead, she leads them toward the particular trait she considers important, and then tries to get them to elaborate on this. Discussion continues in this manner:

Lala: (referring to his drinking) ...It says once every three months.

Teacher: Yeah. So, that isn't habitual, is it? Does he work? Is there any sentence in here that tells you he doesn't do his work? ....All right, what else do we find out about Pancho? Alberta, do you know anything more about him?

Mariloo: He goes to confess his sins.

Teacher: All right. He goes to confess his sins. So that tells you something about him. And then what does he do?

The entire lesson continues in this manner, with the teacher crafting her questions in a way that puts forward her interpretation of the story and the students providing short responses that may or may not get picked up. The plausibility of the students' responses is disregarded, with the teacher's focus on her desired response rather than on the students positing a plausible one. Further, the teacher's line of questioning leads to a building block approach to the story; the parts providing segments of meaning with the assumption that in some way, added together, they will lead to a full understanding. However, in this lesson, the bits remain fragmented, never woven back into a whole. We can see this in the last two segments of the lesson:

Topic #12: (Back to) the baby

Teacher: All right. Tularecito is a very different looking baby. Anything else about him?

Edna: His head is bigger than the body.

Teacher: Okay, his head is bigger than the body (writes on board).

Lala: Deformedly broad shoulders

Teacher: Okay. What does that mean? Are they normal like everyone else's?...

On board at end of discussion:

Looks like:
a little frog
distorted

no neck
peculiar body
loose legs
head bigger than body
deformedly broad shoulders

Topic #13: Gomez' attitude towards the baby

Teacher: All right, look at that statement again in the same paragraph that we just read. (Reads) "The baby's flat face together with his peculiar body caused it automatically to be named Tularecito, little frog. Although, Franklin Gomez often called it coyote, for he said, "There is in this boy's face that ancient wisdom one finds in the face of a coyote." What attitude do you suspect just from reading this sentence?

Edna: Doesn't care.

Teacher: Okay, so he's not concerned about the baby's looks. What else might you figure out from that Carla? --from the statement, "...in this boy's face that ancient wisdom that one finds in the face of a coyote?" Do you think he might be smart? Or have a special talent?

Carla: Yes.

Teacher: Okay, that's interesting. What I'd like to do right now is, does everyone have this question copied? I'll give them to you tomorrow in a more organized way... pass the stories forward, please, and those people who did not get a vocabulary sheet, would you come up and get them now?

Although the students' responses to the question "Anything else about him?" are correct (they are directly stated in the text), the teacher was hoping that one of the students would mention the baby's seemingly special abilities. However, when no student mentions this, the teacher brings it up (in segment #13), and reads that section of the text aloud. She does not link the coyote-like attribute with anything the students had just listed, nor does she try to connect to any of the previous parts of the story they have already discussed. Although the story will continue to be discussed the next day, the students are not directed to use their review of the text as the basis for a more comprehensive rereading of the piece, in order to formulate their own interpretations, to be discussed tomorrow. Instead, there is some indication that the lesson will be much like this one, with the teacher's questions used as the focus of instruction.

Features of Recitation

Let us look a bit more closely at the kinds of thinking the students have exhibited in this lesson. Approximately 32% of the time the students were assuming a literary orientation by exploring possibilities in ways that brought them into the world of the story, and the rest of the time (68%) they took an information gathering approach to understanding, searching for and providing more targeted information. If we consider the ways in which the students related to the text, we learn that 87% of the time they were attempting to gain enough information to form an understanding of the characters

and events, and 13% of the time they were building and elaborating their understandings. This is largely due to the fact that their own initial impressions were not called upon; instead, the teacher's questions prompted them to focus on ideas--in line with the teacher's interpretations.

Although the teacher and students called this lesson a discussion, certain basic components of a discussion were missing. The participants (teacher and students or students and students) did not speak to each other; they did not respond to or build upon each other's ideas nor did the students elaborate on or refer back to their own ideas, although the teacher did. The role of the teacher and the role of the students followed a well-described pattern (Applebee, 1981; Barnes, 1976; Langer, 1984; Mehan, 1979) where the teacher is the holder of information and the students try to guess what the teacher knows and wants. This places the students in the role of guessers and the teacher in the role of evaluator. Thus, the students' thoughts focus on the teacher's intentions rather than on their own understandings. Further, since the surface segments of the text seem to be held as the primary source of meaning (as opposed to the students' own growing envisionments of the story), there seems to be little motivation to step into the world of the text and explore the characters' experiences, emotions, or actions.

Student-Centered and Text-Centered Lessons

We have seen two very different kinds of lessons, motivated by two very different views of literary knowing. From a response-based perspective, the text is at best only a blueprint to be followed (more or less) by the powerful eyes and mind of a thoughtful and opinion-ridden reader--one who has lived a life full of experiences that will shade and shape the meanings he or she creates. This view assumes that there will be more than one defensible interpretation (and many indefensible ones) for each piece read. In contrast, from a text-based perspective, the meaning is locked within the text, and a careful reading will reveal that meaning. This perspective moves toward one best interpretation of the piece, with others considered less defensible--flawed in some essential way. Let us look at the lessons once again to compare some of the ways each type of approach works itself out in the classroom discussion. In the discussion of The Great Gatsby, 14% of the topics were initiated by the teacher and 14% were ended by the teacher; in other words, the students introduced and made final comments about the topics they discussed 86% of the time. This suggests that the students' concerns were presented for discussion, and they went on to another topic when the students were ready to do so. In contrast, in the discussion of "Tularecito," the teacher initiated 69% of the topics and ended 77% of them. The students opened and closed the discussion of the topics less than a quarter of the time. In this case, it was the teacher who maintained greatest control over what to talk about and when to move on and these issues were based on a close reading of what she felt to be key phrases in the text. Similarly, of the total number of words spoken in the Gatsby discussion 58% were the students'. In contrast, 28% of the words were spoken by the students in the "Tularecito" discussion.

The Gatsby lesson, although a typical rather than exceptionally thought-provoking lesson, provides us with one example of how discussion can be used to move student thinking along. The students address their comments to each other as well as to their teacher, and the teacher guides them in the discussion--in ways to discuss as well as in ways to think about the content (see Langer, 1991). When she gives her opinion, the students accept it as such, understanding that there are multiple perspectives they can take and that the teacher's view, although valid, is not necessarily the one they must take, and certainly not without more thought and exploration.

The Gatsby discussion is also an example of a typical, but not exceptional lesson, that explores a horizon of possibilities. However, it serves as an example of interaction and of a pattern of thinking that takes place when the teacher invites the students to arrive at and move beyond their initial

understandings through exploration. The discussion begins with the teacher inviting the students to bring up their concerns, and Christie begins with "...I wasn't exactly sure why he was invited..." This is the sort of "I don't understand" question most readers have when they finish reading a piece. This type of question doesn't signify that the students don't know how to read, or didn't understand the piece very well, but that they have left their reading with a host of questions about motivations, feelings, and relationships--ambiguities that are left for the reader to ponder and construe. Because exploring the range of possibilities is at the heart of the literary experience, Christie's question is a good one. She has opened her understanding to another round of exploration--to move her understanding even farther along as she steps back into the story and tries to get to know Gatsby better.

When class discussion is treated as exploration, students learn that as in real life, you get to know the characters and their behaviors best if you explore and imagine their intentions, actions, and feelings from multiple perspectives. And, as in real life, you never really know; these interpretations are always tentative, to be reflected upon and further explored anew, with time and new ideas. They learn that the enjoyment of literature and the act of literary understanding, unlike reading in their other subjects, involves the exploration of an ever-changing horizon of possibilities. And it is this notion of discussion as exploring horizons of possibilities that I suggest needs to be at the center of the reform movement in literature.

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